



A MILLION SUNS

A MILLION MILES FROM HOME.
WHO CAN SAVE HER?

BETH REVIS

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RAZORBILL

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1 ELDER

“THIS ISN’T GOING TO BE EASY,” I MUTTER, STARING AT THE solid metal door that leads to the Engine Room on the Shipper Level of *Godspeed*. In the dull reflection, I see Eldest’s dark eyes, just before he died. I see the smirk on the corner of Orion’s mouth as he relished in Eldest’s death. Somewhere, beneath my cloned features and the echoes of every Eldest before me, there has to be something in me that’s mine alone, unique and not found in the cloning material two levels beneath my feet.

I like to think that, anyway.

I roll my thumb over the biometric scanner and the door zips open, taking with it the image of a face that has never felt like mine.

A very mechanical smell—a mixture of metal and grease and burning—wraps around me as I enter the Engine Room. The walls vibrate with the muffled heartbeat of the ship’s engine, a *whirr-churn-whirr* sound that I used to think was beautiful.

The first-level Shippers stand at attention, waiting for me. The Engine Room is usually crowded, bustling with activity as the Shippers try to figure out what has crippled the lead-cooled fast reactor engine, but today I

asked for a private meeting with the top ten Shippers, the highest-ranking officers beneath me.

I feel scruffy compared to them. My hair's too long and messy, and while my clothes should have been recycled long ago, their dark tunics and neatly pressed trousers fit perfectly. There is no uniform for the Shippers—there's no uniform for anyone on board the ship—but First Shipper Marae demands neatness of everyone she has authority over, especially the first-level Shippers, who all favor the same dark clothing worn by Marae.

Marae's in the twenty-year-old generation, only a few years older than me. But already lines crease at her eyes, and the downward turn of her mouth seems permanent. A carpenter could check the accuracy of his level by the line of Marae's shorn hair. Amy says that everyone on board *Godspeed* looks the same. I suppose, given that we're monoethnic, she's right in a way. But no one could ever mistake Marae for anyone else, nor think she's anything less than First Shipper.

"Eldest," she says by way of greeting.

"I've told you: just call me Elder."

Marae's scowl deepens. People started calling me Eldest as soon as I assumed the role. And I'd always known I'd *be* Eldest at some point, although I'd never dreamed that I'd be Eldest so soon. Still, I was born for this position. I *am* this position. And if I can't see it in myself, I can see it in the way the Shippers still stand at attention, the way Marae waits for me to speak.

I just . . . I can't take the title. Someone called me Eldest in front of Amy, and I couldn't stand the way her eyes narrowed and her body froze, for just a minute, just long enough for me to realize that there was no way I could bear to see her look at me as Eldest again.

"I can be the Eldest without changing my name," I say.

Marae doesn't seem to agree, but she won't argue.

The other first-level Shippers stare at me, waiting. They are all still, with their backs erect and their blank faces turned to me. I know part of their perfection is due to Marae's strong hand as First Shipper, but I also know a part of it comes from the past, from Eldest before he was killed and the exacting way he expected everyone to perform.

There is nothing of me in their stoic obedience.

I clear my throat.

"I, uh, I needed to talk to you, the first-level Shippers, about the engine." I swallow, my mouth both dry and bitter-tasting. I don't look at them, not really. If I look into their faces—their older, more experienced faces—I will lose my nerve.

I think of Amy. When I first saw Amy, all I could see was her bright red hair swirled like ink frozen in water, her pale skin almost as translucent as the ice she was frozen in. But when I imagine her face now, I see the determined set of her jaw, the way she seems taller when angry.

I take a deep breath and stride across the floor toward Marae. She meets my gaze head-on, her back very straight, her mouth very tight. I stand uncomfortably close to her, but she doesn't flinch as I raise both my arms and shove her shoulders, hard, so she crashes into the control panel behind her. Emotion flares on the faces of the others—Second Shipper Shelby looks confused; Ninth Shipper Buck's eyes narrow and his jaw clenches; Third Shipper Haile whispers something to Sixth Shipper Jodee.

But Marae doesn't react. This is the mark of how different Marae is from everyone else on the ship: she doesn't even question me when I push her.

"Why didn't you fall over?" I ask.

Marae pushes herself up against the control panel. “The edge broke my fall,” she says. Her voice is flat, but I catch a wary tone under her words.

“You would have kept going if something hadn’t stopped you. The first law of motion.” I shut my eyes briefly, trying to remember all I had studied in preparation for this moment. “On Sol-Earth, there was a scientist. Isaac Newton.” I stumble over the name, unsure of how to pronounce a word with two *a*’s in a row. It comes out as “is-saaahk,” and I’m sure that’s wrong, but it’s not important.

Besides, it’s clear the others know who I’m talking about. Shelby looks nervously at Marae, her eyes darting once, twice, three times to the mask of Marae’s unnaturally still face. The steady stoniness of the other first-level Shippers’ postures melts.

I bite back a bitter smile. That seems to be what I always do: break the perfect order Eldest worked so hard to make.

“This Newton, he came up with some laws of motion. It seems frexing obvious, this stuff he wrote about, but . . .” I shake my head, still somewhat shocked by how simple his laws of motion were. Why had it never occurred to me before? To Eldest? How was it that while Eldest taught me the basics of all the sciences, somehow Newton and the laws of motion never came up? Did he just not know about them, or did he want to keep that information from me too?

“It’s the bit about inertia that caught my attention,” I say. I start pacing—a habit I’ve picked up from Amy. I’ve picked up a lot of things from Amy, including the way she questions everything. *Everything*.

Right at the top of my questions is a fear I’ve been too terrified to voice. Until now. Until I stand in front of the Shippers with the limping engine churning behind my back.

I shut my eyes a moment, and in the blackness behind my eyelids, I see my best friend, Harley. I see the hollow emptiness of space as the hatch

door opened and his body flew out. I see the hint of a smile on his lips. Just before he died.

"There are no external forces in space," I say, my voice barely louder than the *whirr-churn-whirr* of the engine.

There was no force that could stop Harley from going out that hatch door three months ago. And now that he's in space, there's no force to stop him from floating forever through the stars.

The Shippers stare at me, waiting. Marae's eyes are narrowed. She won't give this to me. She's going to make me pull the truth from her.

I continue, "Eldest told me that the engine was losing efficiency. That we were hundreds of years behind schedule. That we had to fix the engine or risk never reaching Centauri-Earth."

I turn around and look at the engine as if it could answer me. "We don't need it, do we? We don't need the fuel. We just need enough to get to top speed, and then we could shut off the engine. There's no friction, no gravity—the ship would keep moving through space until we reached the planet."

"Theoretically." I don't know if Marae's voice is wary because she's unsure of the theory or because she's unsure of me.

"If the engine's not working—and hasn't been working for decades—then the problem should be that we're going too *fast*, right? That we're going to just zoom past the planet . . ." Now there's doubt in my voice—what I'm saying goes against everything I thought I knew. But I've been researching the engine problem since Eldest died, and I just can't correlate what Eldest told me with what I've learned from Sol-Earth's books. "Frex, our problem should be that we're going to crash into Centauri-Earth because we can't slow down, not that we're going to float aimlessly in space, right?"

I feel as if even the engine has eyes, and it's watching me too.

Looking at the Shippers, I can see that they all—they *all*—knew that the engine's problems did not lie in fuel and acceleration. They knew all along. I haven't told them anything new with this information. Of course the first-level Shippers know of Newton and physics and inertia. Of course they do. Of course they understood that Eldest's words about inefficient fuel and limping through space behind schedule were entirely false.

And what a frexing fool I am for thinking differently.

"What's going on here?" I ask. My embarrassment feeds my anger. "Is there even anything wrong with the engine? With the fuel?"

The Shippers' eyes go to Marae, but Marae's silently watching me.

"Why would Eldest lie to me about this?" I can feel myself losing control. I don't know what I expected—that I'd figure out the big problem and the Shippers would jump up and fix it? I don't know. I never really thought past telling them that the laws of physics go against the explanations Eldest gave me. I never thought that I'd say what I came to say and they would look to the First Shipper, not me.

"Eldest lied to you," Marae says calmly, "because we lied to him."